

Penrose Margaret

Dorothy Dale's Great Secret



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CHAPTER I

AN AUTOMOBILE RIDE

“There is one thing perfectly delightful about boarding schools,” declared Tavia, “when the term closes we can go away, and leave it in another world. Now, at Dalton, we would have to see the old schoolhouse every time we went to Daly’s for a pound of butter, a loaf of bread – and oh, yes! I almost forgot! Mom said we could get some bologna. Whew! Don’t your mouth water, Dorothy? We always did get good bologna at Daly’s!”

“Bologna!” echoed Dorothy. “As if the young ladies of Glenwood School would disgrace their appetites with such vulgar fare!”

At this she snatched up an empty cracker box, almost devouring its parifine paper, in hopes of finding a few more crumbs, although Tavia had poured the last morsels of the wafers down her own throat the night before this conversation took place. Yes, Tavia had even made a funnel of the paper and “took” the powdered biscuits as doctors administer headache remedies.

“All the same,” went on Tavia, “I distinctly remember that you had a longing for the skin of my sausage, along with the end piece, which you always claimed for your own share.”

“Oh, please stop!” besought Dorothy, “or I shall have to purloin my hash from the table to-night and stuff it into – ”

“The armlet of your new, brown kid gloves,” finished Tavia. “They’re the very color of a nice, big, red-brown bologna, and I believe the inspiration is a direct message. ‘The Evolution of a Bologna Sausage,’ modern edition, bound in full kid. Mine for the other glove. Watch all the hash within sight to-night, and we’ll ask the girls to our clam-bake.”

“Dear old Dalton,” went on Dorothy with a sigh. “After all there is no place like home,” and she dropped her blond head on her arms, in the familiar pose Tavia described as “thinky.”

“But home was never like this,” declared the other, following up Dorothy’s sentiment with her usual interjection of slang. At the same moment she made a dart for a tiny bottle of Dorothy’s perfume, which was almost emptied down the front of Tavia’s blue dress, before the owner of the treasure had time to interfere.

“Oh, that’s mean!” exclaimed Dorothy. “Aunt Winnie sent me that by mail. It was a special kind – ”

“And you know my weakness for specials – real bargains! There!” and Tavia caught Dorothy up in her arms. “I’ll rub it all on your head. Tresses of sunshine, perfumed with incense!”

“Please stop!” begged Dorothy. “My hair is all fixed!”

“Well, it’s ‘fixest’ now. The superlative you know. I do hate your hair prim. Never knew a girl with heavenly hair who did not want to make a mattress of it. I have wonderfully enhanced the beauty of your coiffure, mam’selle, for which I ask to be permitted one kiss!” and at this the two girls became so entangled in each other’s embrace that it would have been hard to tell whom the blond head belonged to, or who might be the owner of the bronze ringlets.

But Dorothy Dale was the blond, and Octavia Travers, “sported” the dark tresses. “Sported” we say advisedly, for Tavia loved sport better than she cared for her dinner, while Dorothy, an entirely different type of girl, admired the things of this world that were good and beautiful, true and reliable; but at the same time she was no prude, and so enjoyed her friend’s sports, whenever the mischief involved no serious consequences.

That “Doro” as her chums called Dorothy, and Tavia could be so unlike, and yet be such friends, was a matter of surprise to all their acquaintances. But those who have read of the young ladies in the previous stories of the series, “Dorothy Dale; – A Girl of To-Day,” and “Dorothy Dale at Glenwood School,” have had sufficient introduction to these interesting characters to understand how natural it was for a lily (our friend Dorothy) to love and encourage a frolicsome wild flower (Tavia) to cling to the cultured stalk, to keep close to the saving influence of the lily’s heart – so close that no gardener would dare to tear away that wild flower from the lily’s clasp, without running the risk of cruelly injuring the more tender plant.

So it was with these two girls. No one could have destroyed their love and friendship for each other without so displacing their personalities as to make the matter one of serious consequences.

Many other girls had coveted Dorothy’s love; some had even tried to obtain it by false stories, or greatly exaggerated accounts of Tavia’s frolics. But Dorothy loved Tavia, and believed in her, so all attempts to destroy her faith were futile. And it was this faith, when the time came, that inspired Dorothy Dale to keep the Great Secret.

Glenwood School was situated amid the mountains of New England, and the two girls had completed one term there. On the afternoon when this story opens they were lounging in their own particular room, nineteen by number, waiting for the recreation bell to send its muffled chimes down the corridor.

They were waiting with unusual impatience, for the “hour of freedom” to come, for they expected visitors in an automobile.

“Like as not,” Tavia broke in suddenly, without offering a single excuse for the surprising interjection, “the Fire Bird will break down, and we won’t get our ride after all.”

“Cheerful speculation,” interposed Dorothy, “but not exactly probable. The Fire Bird is an auto that never breaks down.”

“What, never?” persisted Tavia, laughing.

“No, never,” declared Dorothy. “Of course all automobiles are subject to turns, but to really break down – Aunt Winnie would never allow her boys to run a machine not entirely reliable.”

“O-o-o-oh!” drawled Tavia, in mock surprise. Then the girls settled down to wait.

The Fire Bird, was a touring car in which the girls had enjoyed some noted rides about their home town of Dalton. Dorothy’s aunt, Mrs. Winthrop White, of North Birchland, owned the car, and her two sons, Edward and Nathaniel (or Ned and Nat, to give them the titles they always went by) good looking young fellows, were usually in charge of it when their favorite cousin Dorothy, and her friend Tavia, were the other passengers.

It may as well be stated at this time that Nat and Tavia were excellent friends, and even on a ride that had been termed notorious (on account of the strange experiences that befell the party while making a tour), Tavia and Nat had managed to have a good time, and made the best of their strange adventures.

It was not surprising then that on this afternoon, while Dorothy and Tavia waited for another ride in the Fire Bird, their brains should be busy with speculative thoughts. Tavia was sure Nat would think she had grown to be a real young lady, and Dorothy was so anxious to see both her cousins, that she fell to thinking they might have outgrown the jolly, big-boy relationship, and would come to her stiff and stylish young men.

The peal of the recreation bell in the outer hall suddenly aroused the girls, and, at the same moment the “honk-honk” of the Fire Bird’s horn announced the arrival of the long expected boys.

“There they are!” exclaimed Tavia, quite unnecessarily, for Dorothy was already making her pearl-tinted veil secure over her yellow head; and while Tavia was wasting her time, looking out of the window at the auto, which was surrounded by boys and girls who stood on the path, plainly admiring the two cousins and the stylish car, Dorothy was quite ready for the ride.

“Do come, Tavia!” she called. “The afternoon is short enough!”

“Com – ing!” shouted her irrepressible companion in high glee, making a lunge for her own veil, and tossing it over her head as she dashed down the corridor.

Dorothy stopped at the office on her way out to tell the principal, Mrs. Pangborn, that the expected visitors had arrived, and that she and Tavia were starting for the ride, permission to go having been granted in advance.

Outside, just beyond the arch in the broad driveway, the Fire Bird panted and puffed, as if anxious to take flight again. Ned was at the steering wheel and as for Nat, he was helping Tavia into the machine “with both hands” some jealous onlookers declared afterward. However Dorothy’s friend Rose-Mary Markin (known to her chums as Cologne because of her euphonious first names) insisted differently in the argument that followed the puffing away of the car.

It was no small wonder that the coming of the Fire Bird should excite such comment among the girls at Glenwood school. An automobile ride was no common happening there, for while many of the parents of the young ladies owned such machines, Glenwood was far away from home and so were the autos.

Edna Black, called Ned Ebony, and regarded as Tavia’s most intimate friend, insisted that Tavia looked like a little brown sparrow, as she flew off, with the streamers of her brown veil flying like wings. Molly Richards, nick-named Dick, and always “agin’ th’ government” like the foreigner in politics, declared that the girls “were not in it” with the boys, for, as she expressed it, “girls always do look like animated rag-bags in an automobile.”

“Boys just put themselves on the seat and stay put,” she announced, “but girls – they seem to float above the car, and they give me the shivers!”

“All the same,” interrupted Cologne, “the damsels manage to hang on.”

“And Dorothy was a picture,” ventured Nita Brant, the girl given to “excessive expletive ejaculations,” according to the records of the Nick Association, the official club of the Juniors.

So the Fire Bird, with its gay little party, flew over the hills of Glenwood. Dorothy was agreeably surprised to find her cousins just as good natured and just as boy-like as they had been when she had last seen them, and they, in turn, complimented her on her improved appearance.

“You look younger though you talk older,” Ned assured Dorothy, with a nice regard for the feminine feeling relative to age.

“And Tavia looks – looks – how?” stammered Nat, with a significant look at his elder brother.

“Search me!” replied the other evasively, determined not to be trapped by Nat into any “expert opinion.”

“Beyond words!” finished Nat, with a glance of unstinted admiration at his companion.

“Bad as that?” mocked Tavia. “The girls do call me ‘red head’ and ‘brick-top.’ Yes, even ‘carrotty’ is thrown at me when I do anything to make Ned mad. You know that’s the girl,” she hurried to add, “the girl – Edna Black – Ned Ebony for short, you know. She’s the jolliest crowd – ”

“How many of her?” asked Ned, pretending to be ignorant of Tavia’s school vernacular.

“Legion,” was the enthusiastic answer, which elastic comment settled the question of Edna Black, for the time being, at least.

The roads through Glenwood wound up and down like thread on a spool. Scarcely did the Fire Bird find itself on the top of a hill before it went scooting down to the bottom. Then another would loom up and it had to be done all over again.

This succession of steep grades, first tilting up and then down, kept Ned busy throwing the clutches in and out, taking the hills on the low gear, then slipping into full speed ahead as a little level place was reached, and again throwing off the power and drifting down while the brakes screeched and hummed as if in protest at being made to work so hard. The two girls, meanwhile, were busy speculating on what would happen if an “something” should give way, or if the powerful car should suddenly refuse to obey the various levers, handles, pedals and the maze of things of which Ned seemed to have perfect command.

“This reminds me of the Switch-back Railway,” remarked Nat, as the machine suddenly lurched first up, and then down a rocky “bump.”

“Y-y-y-es!” agreed Ned, shouting to be heard above the pounding of the muffler. “It’s quite like a trip on the Scenic Railway – pretty pictures and all.”

“I hope it isn’t dangerous,” ventured Dorothy, who had too vivid a remembrance of the narrow escape on a previous ride, to enjoy the possibility of a second adventure.

“No danger at all,” Ned hastened to assure her.

“A long hill at last!” exclaimed Nat, as the big strip of brown earth uncoiled before them, like so many miles of ribbon dropped from the sky, with a knot somewhere in the clouds. “A long hill for sure. None of your dinky little two-for-a-cent kinds this time!”

“Oh!” gasped Dorothy, involuntarily catching at Ned’s arm. “Be careful, Ned!”

Ned took a firmer grip on the steering wheel, as he finished throwing out the gear and shutting off the power, while the spark lever sent out a shrill sound as he swung it in a segment over the ratchet.

The hill was not only remarkably steep, but consisted of a series of turns and twists. Down the grade the car plunged in spite of the brakes that Ned jammed on, with all his force, to prevent a runaway. He was a little pale, but calm, and with his steady hands on the wheel, clinging firmly to it in spite of the way it jerked about, as if trying to get free, he guided the Fire Bird down, the big machine swerving from right to left, but ever following where the lad directed it.

As they swung around a turn in the descending road a clump of trees obstructed the view for a moment. Then the car glided beyond them, gathering speed every moment, in spite of the brakes.

“The creek!” yelled Tavia in sudden terror, pointing to where a small, but deep stream flowed under the road. “There’s the creek and the bridge is broken!”

The water was spanned by a frail structure, generally out of order and in a state of uncertain repair. It needed but a glance to show that it was now in course of being mended, for there was a pile of material near it. Work, however, had been temporarily suspended.

Then, there flashed into view a warning signboard announcing that the old planking of the bridge had been taken up to allow the putting down of new, and that the bridge was impassable. The four horror-stricken occupants of the car saw this at a glance.

“Stop the car!” cried Tavia.

“Can’t!” answered Ned hoarsely. “I’ve got the emergency brake on, but it doesn’t seem to hold.”

“It’s all right,” called Nat. “I saw a wagon go over the bridge when we were on our way to the school this afternoon.”

“But it crossed on some loose, narrow planks!” Tavia gasped. “I saw them put the boards there yesterday when we were out for our walk! I forgot all about them! Oh! Stop the car! We can’t cross on the planks! We’ll all be killed!”

Ned leaned forward, pulling with all his strength on the brake handle, as if to force it a few more notches back and make the steel band grip tighter the whirring wheels that were screeching out a shrill protest at the friction.

“I – I can’t do it!” he exclaimed almost in a whisper.

The Fire Bird was dashing along the steep incline. Ned clung firmly to the steering wheel, for though there was terrible danger ahead, it was also close at hand should the auto swerve from the path. His face was white, and Nat’s forced breathing sounded loud in the ears of the terror-stricken girls.

The bridge was but a few hundred feet away. The auto skidded along as if under power, though the gasoline was shut off.

“There’s a plank across the entrance! Maybe that will stop us!” cried Nat.

“Never in this world!” replied Ned, in despairing tones.

Dorothy was sending up wordless prayers, but she did not stir from her seat, sitting bravely still, and not giving way to useless terror. Nor did Tavia, once the first shock was over, for she saw

how quiet Dorothy was, and she too, sank back among the cushions, waiting for the crash she felt would soon come.

“If some boards are only down!” murmured Ned. “Maybe I can steer – ”

The next instant the Fire Bird had crashed through the obstruction plank. It splintered it as if it were a clothes pole, and, a moment later, rumbled out upon the frail, loose planking, laid lengthwise across the floorless bridge, as a path for the repair teams.

“Oh! Oh!” shrieked the two girls in one breath.

Nat jumped up from his seat, and, leaning forward, grasped his brother by the shoulders.

Then what followed was always a mystery to the four who had an involuntary part in it. The front wheels took the narrow planks, and clung there as Ned held the steering circle steady. There was a little bump as the rear wheels took the same small boards. There was a crashing, splintering sound and then, before any of those in the car had a chance to realize it, the Fire Bird had whizzed across the bridge and was brought to a quick stop on the other side.

“Whew!” gasped Ned, as he tried to open the paralyzed hands that seemed grown fast to the steering wheel.

“Look at that!” cried Nat, as he leaped from the car and pointed back toward the bridge. “We broke two planks in the very middle, and only the fast rate we clipped over them saved us from going down!”

“What an escape!” cried Tavia as she jumped from her seat.

“Is the car damaged?” asked Dorothy, as she too alighted to stand beside her chum.

“Something happened to the radiator when we hit the rail and broke it,” said Ned, as he saw water escaping from the honey-comb reservoir. “But I guess it won’t amount to much. It isn’t leaking badly. The idea of the county having a picture bridge over a river! Why there’s a swift current here, and it’s mighty deep. Just look at that black whirlpool near the eddy. If we’d gone down there what the machine left of us would have been nicely cooled off at any rate!”

The two boys were soon busy examining the car, while Dorothy and Tavia stood in the road.

“Wasn’t it dreadful!” exclaimed Dorothy. “I do believe we ought not to go auto riding – something happens every time we go out.”

“And to think that I knew about the bridge!” whispered Tavia. “Only yesterday I saw it and noticed how unsafe it was. Then I forgot all about it. Oh, Dorothy! If anything had happened it would have been my fault!”

CHAPTER II

TAVIA HAS PLANS

Dorothy threw her arms about Tavia, and, for a few moments the two girls were locked in each other's embrace. The reaction, following their lucky escape from almost certain death, had unnerved them. Nor were the two boys altogether free from a shaky feeling, as they carefully looked over the car to see if it had suffered any further damage than the leaky radiator.

"Think she'll do?" asked Nat.

"Guess so," replied his brother. "My, but that was as close a call as I have ever had."

"Me too. I guess we'd better take a breathing spell before we go on."

The boys sat down on a grassy bank, and the girls followed their example. They looked back over the bridge, and at the two broken planks that had nearly proved their undoing. Through the spaces, where the flooring was torn up, the black, swirling waters could be seen.

While the auto party are resting until they have somewhat gotten over the fright caused by their narrow escape, let me tell something of Dorothy and her friends. As set forth in the first book of this series, "Dorothy Dale; A Girl of To-Day," the girl was the daughter of Major Frank Dale, a veteran of the Civil War. He ran a weekly newspaper, called *The Bugle* in Dalton, a small town in New York state. Dorothy's mother had died some years previous. The girl had two brothers, younger than herself, named Joe and Roger.

Dorothy took part in a temperance crusade in Dalton and had much to do in unraveling the mystery of an unfortunate man given to drink. He left a small fortune to his daughter, whose whereabouts were unknown, and Dorothy succeeded in finding her. In her work the girl was much hampered by a man named Anderson, who sought to do her bodily harm, and who was at the bottom of the mystery concerning the daughter of the unfortunate man.

Dorothy proved herself a brave girl, and, with the help of Tavia, who became her especial chum, did much to aid several persons in Dalton.

In the second volume, "Dorothy Dale at Glenwood School" there I related how Dorothy and her father came upon better days. Major Dale fell heir to quite a sum of money, and could give up the newspaper.

Dorothy was sent to Glenwood School, where Tavia accompanied her. The two girls had many exciting times there, and Dorothy was suspected of something for which she was not to blame, suffering much in consequence of her desire to shield another girl. There was much fun at the school, in spite of this, however including a queer walking match and a strange initiation.

Dorothy and her father moved to North Birchland, the home of Mrs. Winthrop White, Mr. Dale's sister. Anderson, the man who had caused Dorothy so much trouble turned up again, but was eventually sent to jail.

After the holidays Dorothy and Tavia returned to school, where we find them at the opening of this story. They had become friends of nearly all the students, though, as is natural, had made some enemies, as what girl does not?

Now the party on the roadside prepared to start off again.

"I can't forgive myself for not remembering about the dangerous state of the bridge," went on Tavia, when Ned and Nat had announced that the auto was fit to continue its journey.

"Of course it wasn't your fault," said Dorothy.

"Yes it was," insisted Tavia. "You wouldn't have forgotten it, Doro, dear!"

And, to give Dorothy credit, she would not have been so thoughtless. But she was a different type of girl from Tavia. It was the way she had been brought up, as much as her own character, that caused this difference. Good breeding is not a virtue, it is a blessing: hence in considering such a gift

we admire the fortunate possessor, just as we esteem the beauty of the cultured rose, and, naturally compare it favorably when placed next to some coarse untrained wild flower.

So it was with our two friends, Dorothy and Tavia. Dorothy was well bred, and could always be relied upon, for the good breeding was nicely coupled with a kindness of heart that composed a charming character. Though Dorothy had no mother her aunt, Mrs. Winthrop White almost filled that place in the girl's heart.

The White family, with whom Dorothy, her father and two brothers had gone to live, since the advent of the legacy, consisted of Mrs. White and her two sons, Nat and Ned. Mr. White had died some years ago, while engaged in a scientific expedition.

Not having a daughter of her own Dorothy's Aunt Winnie was especially fond of her pretty niece, and, as the girl could barely remember her own mother, she lavished her affection on her father's sister.

Dorothy's affection, love and devotion to her father was of a different type from that given to any other living creature, not excepting her own darling brothers, Joe and Roger, and Roger had almost grown up in his sister's arms, for he had been a tiny baby when his mother was called away.

It was in Dalton that Dorothy had met and learned to love Tavia. The Travers family, of whom Tavia was the most interesting member, lived not far from the Dale homestead. Tavia had grown up with Dorothy, as her most intimate friend and companion, and it was Dorothy's love for Tavia that had wrought miracles for the girl who lacked proper home training, for her parents were of that class generally designated as improvident.

Tavia always ignored the saving rules of correct society, and, being naturally bright, and strangely pretty was, now that she was in her fifteenth year, in a fair way to be spoiled by those who delighted to hear her witty nonsense, and who looked upon her frolics as entertaining in an otherwise stupid old world.

"Well, shall we go along now?" asked Ned, as he again took his place at the steering wheel.

"Yes, but go slow," begged Tavia. "We can go home by a different road. We have lots of time, before we have to be back to Glenwood School for tea."

"Slow it is," replied Ned, not at all sorry that he could take it easy after the strenuous time. Dorothy had many questions to ask her cousins – all about her father's rheumatism – whether the electric treatment was doing him as much good as the doctors had promised – how her brothers were getting on at school – how strange it seemed to have Roger at school! – and scores of other things. But she always came back to her father or the boys – to Roger – she could scarcely imagine her baby brother running home to Aunt Winnie with his book under his arm.

While Ned and Dorothy were thus busy with family affairs, Nat and Tavia, seated on the rear seat, were discussing purely personal matters. Nat told of the tour he and his brother had made from North Birchland, the trip being undertaken with other members of a club, which was holding a meet not far from Glenwood School. Tavia found plenty of small interesting talk to "give and take" with Nat.

"Dorothy," she asked suddenly, "do you think we could get off all day to-morrow and take a run out to where the auto meet is being held? It would be all sorts of fun and –"

"To-morrow?" echoed Dorothy. "Why you know we have our English exams. and our geometry to make up. Besides, Mrs. Pangborn would never allow us to go to a boys' camp."

"Allow us! Just as if we were in the kindergarten! Let's make up some excuse and go! Now, Doro, don't look so shocked! Surely you have the right to go out with your own cousins?"

"Tavia, don't talk such nonsense!" exclaimed Dorothy severely. "You know perfectly well we are under the school rules, and that we are in honor bound not to violate them. As if any sensible girl would risk her good standing for such an escapade!"

"What's the 'standing' at Glenwood compared to the 'sitting' in the Fire Bird?" asked Tavia flippantly. "Besides, just think of all the jolly fellows we would meet; wouldn't we, Nat?"

“There’s a great collection of wild ducks out there at the auto camp,” Nat answered rather reluctantly, for he plainly saw that Tavia’s surprising proposition had caused Dorothy serious annoyance.

“Well, I’ve a mind to go myself. Will you come for me, boys? I could disappear at class hour, when all the ‘tattle-tales’ will be sure to be busy, scheming out of their work. Then I could get back in time to have my head tied up at lunch hour – head-ache all the morning, you know. Simplest thing in the world.”

Even the boys scarcely smiled as Tavia unfolded a possible plan to deceive her teachers, and to dishonor her own name. Her friends were well accustomed to her pranks and prattle, and usually regarded her nonsense as mere babble. But, somehow, Tavia, was “growing up,” lately, and it seemed quite time for her to take life more seriously.

“Tavia,” spoke up Dorothy finally, “you came to Glenwood upon my aunt’s recommendation, and under my – ”

“Wing!” broke in Tavia, throwing her arms out toward the slender form of the girl seated ahead of her in the auto.

“At any rate,” finished Dorothy, “I’m perfectly sure that my cousins will never take part in any such nonsense.”

“Oh, Mr. Flea, you’ve bitten me, and you must die!” sang Tavia, making a series of melodramatic gestures, that caused the boys to laugh and even made Dorothy smile in forgiveness.

“Thus are my social ambitions nipped in the bud – extinguished in their first, faint gleaming,” went on Tavia, assuming a tone of tragedy. “Well, my fairy-godmother, Dorothy Dale Glenwood, when that day comes that I am forced to spurn the lines of the Social Swim, and you find me beyond the ropes, clinging helplessly to the tail-end of my former prestige, carried out with the great, surging tide of struggling humanity, then you will remember that I had attempted a correct debut, and it ended in a splash of Dale indignation!”

Somehow Tavia’s nonsense had a ring of reality to-day. Perhaps it was the narrow escape at the bridge that had tinted her pictures with such a serious tone – she seemed preoccupied, and gave her chatter in words contradicted by her voice and manner. It was some minutes before any one spoke. All appeared to be enjoying the “valedictory,” and presently Tavia, promising to “turn over a new leaf,” made a grab for a branch of a tree the auto just then passed under, and swished the foliage she captured until every leaf showed its silvery under-side against the deep blue sky. She laughed at her joke.

“Of course you know,” said Ned, as he swung the car into a cross-road that led to Glenwood, “mother expects you to come to North Birchland, with Dorothy, this summer, Tavia. We’ll try to make you comfortable – ahem! Nat has a brand new tandem, besides white duck duds to burn – ”

“Nixy! To wear,” corrected his brother. “Mother says white ducks are economical for man – and beast.”

“Of course you’ll come with me, Tavia,” said Dorothy, noting instantly that her chum had not responded to the kind invitation that Nat had delivered for his mother.

“Perhaps,” replied Tavia, vaguely.

“Are you going to spend all your time at Dalton?” continued Dorothy, much puzzled at Tavia’s manner.

“Oh, no indeed,” answered Tavia, promptly this time, showing plainly, that she had other plans than those connected with her home town.

“I hope you’ll come,” said Nat aside, in pardonable earnestness, for his good times, with the “little bronze beauty” of Dalton, were cherished among his very best memories. Tavia was certainly a jolly girl, and Nat liked her – why should he not – like her?

“Oh, I’ll be sure to see you,” Tavia answered Nat.

Sure to see him? Yes, but she little dreamed then how very glad she would be to see him – and what serious happenings were to take place before that meeting.

CHAPTER III

A CUP OF TEA

“Dorothy,” began Tavia that evening, as the two girls sat alone in their room, enjoying their usual good-night conference, “why couldn’t you take that spin out to the auto meet. It would be no end of good fun.”

“Fun!” echoed Dorothy, surprised that Tavia should again venture to propose such a thing. “Why, Tavia! Really you shock me!” Then she went to the little dresser, under pretext of looking for something, but in reality to gain time – she scarcely knew what to say to her chum, whose sudden whim was so startling.

Tavia sat on the box divan, her hands in her lap, and her brown head bent over, a strange and serious attitude for the girl who was never known to sit still, even in church; and who had the reputation of being the jolliest girl at Glenwood. For some moments she appeared to be unconscious of Dorothy’s presence, so absorbed was she in her own thoughts. Dorothy was now regarding her curiously. What could have turned Tavia’s head? For turned from its usually bright and happy line of thought it plainly was.

“What is it, Tavia?” she asked finally, stealing up to the crouched figure, and placing her arm gently about her chum’s neck.

“Why?” inquired the other, with a sudden start, as if afraid Dorothy would divine her thoughts.

“You are worried about something – come tell me what it is!”

“Worried!” Tavia jumped up, shaking off Dorothy’s arm. “Worried! Dorothy Dale, I believe you’re not well! You act morbid – creepy!”

Dorothy turned away. She was hurt – crushed – that Tavia should spurn her affection and refuse her confidence.

“We always told each other everything,” and Dorothy almost sighed, as her words came slowly, and with strange coldness. “I never imagined you would keep any important secret from me.”

“You silly!” exclaimed Tavia, throwing her arms around Dorothy this time. “Who said I had a secret? What in the world has put that wild notion into your yellow head? – bless it!”

This last expression brought a kiss to the golden ringlets, and, as the two girls sat there, Dorothy with a far-away look in her eyes that were clouded with unbidden tears, Tavia with her cheek pressed lovingly against the blond head, and her own eyes looking into some unknown future, their pose was like a stage picture – the kind usually presented when one sister is about to leave a country home, and the other bids her stay.

“Aren’t we a couple of jays!” broke in Tavia, as soon as she appeared to realize the melodramatic effect. “I declare we ought to travel as ‘The Glum Sisters – Mag and Liz.’ There! Wouldn’t we make a hit for teary ones? Weeps are in great demand they say. Smiles are being overworked in the profresh!” and she strode up to the mirror with a most self-satisfied glance at her pretty face.

“Tavia, you are getting awfully big for slang – it seems more like sneering than joking,” exclaimed Dorothy. “And I’ve been wanting to say that to you – some of the other girls have noticed it. They say you act more like a chorus girl than a Glenwood pupil. Of course I don’t want to hurt your feelings, but I thought it would be better for me to tell you than for you to hear it from some one else.”

“Chorus girl! Thanks! No need to apologize, I assure you. That’s from silly, little Nita Brandt, I suppose? Well, better to act like a chorus girl than – a fool!” blurted out Tavia with a show of temper. “And any silly girl, who can not keep things to herself – well, I always thought Nita was a featherhead and now I know it!”

“Oh, indeed it was not Nita!” Dorothy hastened to assure her. “It was at the lawn tea the other day. You were ‘acting’; don’t you remember? Doing that funny toe dance you are always trying lately.”

“O-o-o-h!” and Tavia made a queer little pout, and a very funny face. “So they appreciated my maiden effort, eh? I am indeed flattered! Tell the girls I’m much obliged and I’ll see that they get passes for the initial performance. Tell them, also, to have the bouquets tagged – it’s so annoying to have a great stack of ‘Please accepts’ to answer, with the superscriptions ‘cut out’ so to speak. I know all the girls will send pansies – they are so sweet, and would make such wicked faces for the girls who could not conveniently present their own adorable ‘phizes’!”

“What in the world are you talking about?” asked Dorothy, who had been listening to the outburst with a queer idea that all this stage business was not mere idle chatter – that there might be a reason for Tavia’s cynicism.

“Talking about auto rides,” quietly answered Tavia, recovering herself with an effort. “Wasn’t that a dandy this afternoon? And to think we might have missed that ‘Horatius at the bridge’ business if I had been silly enough to mention that the planking was gone!”

“Don’t talk of it!” exclaimed Dorothy, shuddering. “I cannot bear to think of what might have happened. And, Tavia, you must not think I have adopted the lecture platform for good, but I must say, it was careless of you not to mention about the bridge – especially as you knew what a hill led down to it, and how the Fire Bird can cover hills.”

“Of course you know I entirely forgot it, Doro,” and now Tavia showed some remorse at the reprimand.

“My! There’s the bell!” exclaimed Dorothy as a clang sounded down the corridor. “I had no idea it was so late,” and she jumped up to disrobe. “Quick, or Miss Higley will see our light.”

“Let her,” answered Tavia indifferently. “I don’t feel very well, and would just love something warm – say a nice little cup of tea – ”

A tap at the door interrupted her remarks. Dorothy jumped into a large closet and Tavia calmly opened the portal.

It was Miss Higley, the second assistant teacher, with rather a forbidding expression on her wrinkled face, and who, among the girls, bore a reputation characterized as “sour.”

“Why is this?” she demanded, stepping in and brushing Tavia aside.

“I was just thinking of calling you,” answered Tavia, clapping her hand to her waist line. “I have such a dreadful – Oh, dear!” and she sat down without further explanation.

“Do you need anything?” asked Miss Higley, her tone more kindly.

“Oh, no; certainly not,” sighed Tavia. “I would not trouble you. But if I might have a sip of tea – that tea you brought Dorothy did her so much good the other night.”

She paused to allow a proper expression of agony to spread over her face, and gently rubbed her hand over the region covered by her belt.

“I suppose you made that tea yourself, didn’t you? It was so good, Dorothy told me.”

That settled it. For any one to praise Miss Higley’s brew! So few persons really do appreciate a good cup of tea. As usual Tavia had “won out.”

“Why of course I’ll get you a cup. I have just made a small pot – I felt rather – rather tired myself. I don’t, as a rule, drink tea at night, but I was not altogether well. Where is Dorothy?”

“Just slipping on a robe,” with a glance at the closet where her chum was concealed. “I’m afraid I disturbed her,” went on Tavia glibly.

“Well, I’ll get the tea,” Miss Higley remarked, as she started to leave the room. “I’ll bring the pot here and we can take it together.”

“Quick!” called Tavia to Dorothy as the door closed. “Slip on your robe. Tea with Higley! Of all the doin’s!” and she promptly turned a somersault on the hitherto unrumpled bed. “Won’t the girls howl! I do hope she brings biscuits. There, get down your box, you precious miser! Just think of ‘crackering’ Higley!”

Dorothy appeared dumfounded. It had all been arranged so quickly – and there was Miss Higley back again. She carried a tray with a small china teapot and three blue cups to match.

"I thought Dorothy might like a cup," she remarked in a sort of apologetic way. "There now," as Tavia and Dorothy relieved her of the tray, "it will be pleasant to have a sip together. Of course we would not do it but for Octavia's illness." (Tavia looked to be in dreadful pain at that moment.) "But since we have to give her a cup of tea, we may as well make a virtue of necessity."

"It is very kind of you, Miss Higley," Dorothy said, rather hesitatingly. "I'm sure that we – that is I – I mean Tavia – should not have put you to all this trouble – but of course one can't help being ill," she hastened to add, for she felt she was rather giving Tavia's secret away.

"It really is too bad to make all this fuss," the supposed sufferer interjected. "You went to a lot of trouble for me, Miss Higley, and I appreciate it very much," and Tavia winked the eye next to Dorothy, but concealed the sign from the sight of the instructress. Tavia was trying hard not to laugh, and her repressed emotion shook the tray to the no small danger of upsetting the teapot, cups and all.

"I never consider my duty any trouble," answered Miss Higley, seeming to feel the obligation of being dignified. In fact, it did not occur to her just then that she was doing a most unprecedented thing – taking tea with two school girls, and after hours at that! However, she had committed herself, and now there was no way out. Dorothy presented her package of chocolate crackers, and Miss Higley took some, while Tavia arranged the tea tray on the little table.

Surely the scene was mirth-provoking. Dorothy in her pretty blue robe, Tavia with her hair loose, collar off and shoes unlaced, and Miss Higley, prim as ever, in her brown mohair, with the long black cord on her glasses. There the three sat, sipping tea and "making eyes," – "too full for utterance," as Tavia would say.

"Such lovely tea," Dorothy managed to gulp out at the risk of allowing her mouth to get loose in a titter, once the tight line of silence was broken.

Then, all at once they stopped drinking – some one was coming down the hall. Miss Higley arose instantly. The gentle tap on the door was answered by Tavia.

Mrs. Pangborn!

"Oh," she apologized, "I did not mean to disturb a little social tea. Do sit down, Honorah," to Miss Higley. "I'm very glad to see you enjoying yourself," and Mrs. Pangborn meant what she said.

"Oh, indeed, I merely came to administer to a sick girl. Octavia was suddenly taken with cramps."

Mrs. Pangborn glanced at Tavia.

"But that cup of tea has made me feel so much better," declared Dorothy's room-mate, with that kind of truth that mere words make – the kind that challenges falsehood.

"I am always glad to see you looking after the girls, Honorah," went on the principal, "but I am equally glad to see you consider yourself. I'm sure you have a perfect right to take a cup of tea here. My dear," to Dorothy, "perhaps you have a sip left?"

Dorothy found there was another cup of the beverage, still warm in the little teapot, and this she poured into her own pink and white china cup for Mrs. Pangborn.

Miss Higley remained standing, seemingly too abashed to move.

"Do finish yours," said Tavia, pushing the empty chair toward the embarrassed teacher.

But Tavia's mirth showed through her alleged illness, and Miss Higley began to feel that she had been imposed upon.

"If you – if you will excuse me," she stammered.

"Oh, do finish your tea," begged Mrs. Pangborn, and so the severe little teacher was obliged to sit down again.

An hour later Tavia was still trying to "untwist her kinks," as she described her attacks of muffled laughter.

"Oh, wasn't it gloriotious!" she exclaimed. "To think I couldn't get a single twinge in my entire system! If I only could put that sort of a cramp in alcohol, wouldn't it be an heirloom to Glenwood!"

“Please do stop,” pleaded Dorothy, from under her quilt. “The next time they may bring a doctor and a stomach pump, and if you don’t let me go to sleep I do believe I will call her.”

“You dare to and I’ll get something dreadfully contagious, so you will have to be disinfected and isolated. But Higley the terrible! The abused little squinty-eyed tattle-tale! Oh, when Mrs. Pangborn said she was glad to see her enjoying herself! That persecuted saint enjoying herself! Didn’t she look the part?”

But even such mirth must succumb to slumber when the victim is young and impressionable, so, with yawns and titters, Tavia finally quieted down to sleep.

CHAPTER IV

THE APPARITION

It seemed to Dorothy that she had scarcely closed her eyes when she was startled by someone moving about the room. She sat up straight to make sure she was not dreaming, and then she saw a white object standing before the mirror!

A beam of moonlight glimmered directly across the glass, and Dorothy could now see that the figure was Tavia.

Surmising that her companion had merely arisen to get a throat lozenge, for she had been taking them lately, Dorothy did not speak, expecting Tavia to return to her bed directly.

But the girl stood there – so long and so still that Dorothy soon called to her.

“What is the matter, Tavia?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing,” returned the other, without looking around.

“But what are you doing?”

“Making up,” and Dorothy could see her daubing cold cream over her face.

Still convinced that Tavia was busy with some ordinary toilet operation, as she had, of late, become very particular about such matters, Dorothy turned over and closed her eyes. But she could not sleep. Something uncanny seemed to disturb her every time she appeared to be dropping off into a doze.

Finally she sat up again. There was Tavia still before the mirror, daubing something over her face.

“Tavia!” called Dorothy sharply. “What in the world are you doing?”

“Making up,” replied Tavia a second time, and without moving from her original position.

Making up! Surely she was spreading cold cream and red crayon dust all over her face! Had she lost her mind?

For an instant Dorothy stood watching her. But Tavia neither spoke nor turned her head.

“Tavia!” she called, taking hold of the hand that held the red chalk. Dorothy noticed that Tavia’s palm and fingers were cold and clammy! And Tavia’s eyes were open, though they seemed sightless. Dorothy was thoroughly frightened now. Should she call someone? Miss Higley had charge of that wing of the school, and perhaps would know what to do. But Dorothy hesitated to make a scene. Tavia was never ill, and if this was only some queer spell it would not be pleasant to have others know about it.

Then, feeling intuitively, that this “making up” should not be made a public affair, Dorothy determined to get Tavia back into her own bed.

“Are you ill?” she asked, rubbing her own hand over her companion’s greasy forehead.

“Ill? No, indeed,” Tavia replied, as mechanically as she had spoken before. Still she smeared on the cold cream and red crayon.

“Come!” commanded Dorothy, and, to her amazement, the girl immediately laid down the box of cream and the stick of chalk while Dorothy led her to the bed and helped her to make herself comfortable on the pillows.

Then Dorothy quietly went to the dresser and lighted a tiny candle, carrying it over to Tavia’s bedside.

Peering anxiously into her face she found her room-mate sleeping and breathing naturally. There was no evidence of illness, and then, for the first time, it occurred to Dorothy that Tavia had been walking in her sleep! And making-up in her sleep!

What could it mean?

How ghastly that hideous color and the streaks made Tavia’s face appear!

And, as Dorothy sat beside the bed, gazing into that besmeared face, while the flicker of the little candle played like a tiny lime-light over the girl's cruelly changed features, a strange fear came into Dorothy's heart!

After all, was Tavia going to disappoint her? Would she fail just when she seemed to have turned the most dangerous corner in her short career – that of stepping from the freedom of girlhood into the more dignified realm of young-ladyship? And would she always be just ordinary Tavia Travers? Always of contradictory impulses, was she never to be relied upon – never to become a well-bred girl?

Tavia turned slightly and rubbed her hand across her face. She seemed to breathe heavily, Dorothy thought, and, as she touched Tavia's painted cheek she was certain it was feverish. With that promptness of action that had always characterized Dorothy's work in real emergencies, she snatched the cold cream from the dresser where Tavia had left it, and, with deft fingers, quickly rubbed a generous supply over the face on the pillows.

Although Tavia was waking now Dorothy was determined, if possible, to remove all traces of the red paint before Tavia herself should know that it had been on her cheeks. Briskly, but with a hand gentle and calm, Dorothy rubbed the cream off on her own linen handkerchief, taking the red mixture with it. Nothing was now left on Tavia's face but a thin coating of the cold cream. That could tell no tales.

Tavia turned to Dorothy and opened her eyes.

"What – what is the matter?" she asked, like one waking from a strange dream.

"Nothing, dear," answered Dorothy. "But I guess you had some night vision," and she placed the candle, still lighted, on the dresser.

"Did I call? Did I have the nightmare? Why are you not in bed?"

"I got up to see if you were all right," answered Dorothy truthfully. "Do you want anything? Shall I get you a nice cool drink from the ice tank?"

Tavia was rubbing her face.

"What's this on my cheeks?" she asked, bringing down her hand, smeared with cold cream.

"I thought you were feverish," said Dorothy, "and I put a little cream on your face – cold cream might be better than nothing, I thought, as we had no alcohol."

Tavia did not seem her natural self, and Dorothy, not slow to note the change in her, was only waiting to see her companion more fully awake, and so out of danger of being shocked suddenly, before calling for help, or, at least, for some medicine.

"My head aches awfully," said the girl on the bed. "I would like a drink of water – if – if it is not too much trouble."

A call bell was just at the door and Dorothy touched the gong as she went out into the hall to get the water.

She had scarcely returned with the drink when Miss Higley, in gown and slippers, entered the room. The light had been turned on by this time, and Tavia could see that the teacher was present, but, whether too sick or too sleepy to notice, she seemed to take the situation as a matter of course, and simply drank the water that Dorothy held to her lips, then sank wearily back on her pillow.

Miss Higley, without saying a word, picked up the hand that lay on the coverlet and felt the pulse. Dorothy stood looking anxiously on.

Tavia really seemed sick, and the tinge of scarlet crayon, that remained after Dorothy's cold cream wash, added a higher tint to the feverish flush that now suffused the girl's cheeks.

"Yes, she has a fever," whispered Miss Higley. "But it is not a very high one. I will go and get my thermometer. Meanwhile pick up your garments, Dorothy, so you can take my room, while I stay here the rest of the night."

Before Dorothy could answer Miss Higley had tiptoed noiselessly from the apartment. Dorothy did not like to leave Tavia – surely it was not anything that might be contagious. But when the teacher

returned she insisted on Dorothy going directly to the room at the end of the hall, while she took up her post at the bedside of Tavia.

It seemed so hard to Dorothy to leave her friend there alone with a comparative stranger. As she reluctantly closed the door on Tavia and Miss Higley, Dorothy's eyes were filled with tears. What could be the matter? All the joking had turned into reality in that short time!

But Tavia was surely not suffering any pain, thought Dorothy, as she seemed so sleepy and did not even murmur when Miss Higley gave her the fever medicine. It flashed across Dorothy's mind that it might have been better to have acquainted Miss Higley with the way Tavia's attack came on – to tell her of the scene before the mirror – but somehow, Dorothy felt that she should not be told – that it would be easier for Tavia if her strange actions were not mentioned to any one – even to Tavia herself. Dorothy felt the matter would not be a pleasant one to discuss.

And as no one knew it but Dorothy, she would keep it to herself, unless some development in Tavia's illness would make it necessary to give the entire history of the case.

With a head almost bursting, it seemed, from the stress of the complication of worry and anxiety, Dorothy finally settled down on Miss Higley's cretonne couch, while the teacher tried to make herself comfortable in Dorothy's place, and Tavia Travers lay still and heavy with a fever, all unconscious of the changes that were going on about her.

CHAPTER V

AN UNTIMELY LETTER

For three days after that eventful night Tavia was obliged to keep to her room. She had a fever – from a cold the doctor thought – nothing contagious he was positive – but, as a precautionary measure Dorothy was given another room, until the fever should be entirely broken.

But the two friends were not to be separated much longer, for Tavia had quite recovered now, and was up and about her room, receiving notes and flowers from the girls, and recuperating generally.

“The first good rest I’ve had in months,” Tavia told Dorothy, as they sat together again on the little window seat, looking out on the tennis court.

“I do really believe you look better than you did before you were taken ill,” agreed Dorothy, giving her friend a look of unmistakable admiration.

“That’s lucky for me,” Tavia replied with something that sounded like a sigh.

“Why?” asked Dorothy in some surprise.

“Oh, nothing,” was the answer, given rather evasively. “But a girl can’t afford to get scrawny. Fancy yourself slinking down like a cornstalk in the fall! Why, even the unapproachable Dorothy Dale could not well stand the slinking process, to say nothing of an ordinary gawk like me going through it,” and Tavia slyly looked into the mirror. She evidently had some particular reason for being so anxious about her good looks.

Dorothy had been noticing this peculiarity of Tavia’s for some time – she had been so extreme about her toilet articles – using cold cream to massage her face daily, then brushing her hair ardently every night, to say nothing of the steam baths she had been giving her face twice a week.

All this seemed very strange to Dorothy, but when she laughed at Tavia’s new-found pastimes the latter declared she was going to look nice for the summer; and that any girl who did not take care of herself externally was quite as blamable as she who neglected the hidden beauty of heart or brain.

And there was no denying that the “grooming” added much to the charms of Tavia’s personality. Her hair was now wonderfully glossy, her cheeks delicately pink, her arms round and her hands so shapely! All this, applied to a girl who formerly protested against giving so much as half an hour daily to her manicure needs!

Dorothy was anxious to have a serious talk with Tavia, but considered it too soon after her illness to bring about that conversation, so she only smiled now as Tavia set all her creams and stuffs in a row, then stretched herself out “perfectly flat to relax,” as the book directions called for. Fancy Tavia doing a thing like that!

“When I dare – that is as soon as that old Rip Van Winkle of a doctor lets me off,” said Tavia suddenly, “I’m going to get a set of exercisers for myself. I don’t believe we have half enough muscle work.”

“Why, my dear, one would imagine you were training for the circus ring,” said Dorothy laughing.

“Hardly,” replied the other. “I never was keen on bouncing, and circus turns all end with a bounce in the net. Those nets make me creepy – a mattress for mine when on the rebound. Have you been to the post-office?”

“No, but I’m going. Want any stamps?”

“No. But if – if you get a letter for me I wish you wouldn’t put it into Mrs. Pangborn’s box – I expect a little note from a girl, and I’m sure it need not be censored, as the rest of the letters are.”

“But the rule,” Dorothy reminded her gently.

“I believe the United States postal laws are of more importance than the silly, baby rules of Glenwood school,” snapped Tavia with unexpected hauteur, “and it’s against the law for one person to open the letters of another.”

“But Mrs. Pangborn takes the place of our mothers – she is really our guardian when we enter her school. We agree to the rules before we are taken in.”

“No, we were ‘taken in’ when we agreed to the rules,” persisted the other. “Now, as it’s your turn to do the post office this week, I think you might do me a little favor – I assure you the letter I expect is not from some boy. Other girls can smuggle boys’ letters in, and yet I can’t contrive to get a perfectly personal note from a perfectly sensible girl, without the missive being – passed upon by – google-eyed Higley!”

“Oh, Tavia! And she was so kind to you when you were sick.”

“Was she? Then she ought to keep it up, and leave my letters alone!”

“Well,” sighed Dorothy rising, “I must go for the mail at any rate.”

“And you won’t save my one little letter?”

“How could I?” Dorothy pleaded.

“Then if you do get it – see it among the others – couldn’t you leave it there? I will be able to walk down to the post office myself tomorrow.”

“But you couldn’t get the mail.”

“Oh, yes I could,” and Tavia tossed her head about defiantly.

Dorothy was certainly in a dilemma. But she was almost due at the post-office, and could not stay longer to argue, so, clapping on her hat, she bade Tavia good-bye for a short time.

“It palls on me,” Tavia told herself, as she again approached the glass and took up the cold cream jar. “Who would ever believe that I would stoop so low! To deceive my own darling Dorothy! And to make a fool of myself with this ‘mugging’ as Nat would say.”

She dropped heavily into a chair. The thought of Dorothy and Nat had a strange power over the girl – she seemed ashamed to look at her own face when the memory of her dearest friends brought her back again to the old time Tavia – the girl free from vanity and true as steel to Dorothy Dale.

“But the letter,” thought Tavia, recovering herself. “If that letter gets into Mrs. Pangborn’s hands!”

Again she buried her face in her arms. Something seemed to sway her, first one way, then the other. What had caused her to change so in those last few short months? Why were her words so hollow now? Her own “copyrighted” slang no longer considered funny, even by those girls most devoted to her originality? And why, above all else, had she fallen ill after that queer dream about making-up with the cold cream and the red crayon?

“I’m afraid my mind was not built for secrets,” she concluded, “and if I keep on moping this way I can’t say what will happen next.”

Meanwhile Dorothy was making her way back from the village with the letters including one addressed to Octavia Travers. She had determined not to make any attempt at giving the note to Tavia without the school principal’s knowledge, for, somehow she feared Tavia’s honesty in such matters, and, although Dorothy felt certain that Tavia would do nothing she really believed to be wrong, she was afraid her chum might be misled by some outside influence.

With a heavy heart Dorothy laid the mail down on Mrs. Pangborn’s desk. That lady was just coming into the office as Dorothy was about to leave.

“Wait, dear,” said Mrs. Pangborn, “until I see if there is any mail for the girls in your corridor. How is Octavia to-day? I hope she will be able to go out by Sunday. Here, I guess this is a letter for her.” Dorothy almost turned pale as the principal took up the small blue envelope. “Just take it to her – perhaps it will cheer her up,” and she handed Dorothy the missive without attempting to open it or question the postmark. “There, I guess that is all I can give you,” and she put the others

in her desk. “Tell Tavia I am anxious to see her out of doors again, and I hope her letter will have good news for her.”

Dorothy turned away with a smile of thanks, not venturing to say a word. She held the blue envelope in her hand, as if it was some tainted thing, for she well knew that the missive was not from home, the postmark “Rochester” standing out plainly on the stamped corner.

Tavia saw her coming, and quickly caught sight of the envelope in her hand.

“There, you old darling!” she exclaimed, giving Dorothy a vigorous hug. “I knew you would bring it to me. How you did ever manage it?”

“Mrs. Pangborn sent it with kind wishes that it might contain good news,” stammered Dorothy. “I made no attempt to get it to you without her knowledge.”

“She had it? And gave it back to you? Why, Dorothy, if she had – but of course it would not really have mattered,” and Tavia slipped the letter into her blouse. “I’m awfully obliged. Did you hear from home?”

“No,” answered Dorothy simply, a flush covering her fair face as she saw Tavia hide the letter. “I’m going out for a few minutes – so you may read that very important note, Tavia.”

CHAPTER VI ON THE LAWN

“When I was a very small girl,” exclaimed Mollie Richards, otherwise known as Dick, “I used to hope I would die young so I could escape the tooth-filling process, but here I am, doing these dreadful exams, and I haven’t died yet.”

“Never despair,” quoted Rose-Mary. “The worst is yet to come.”

“Cheer up, fellows,” lisped little Nita Brandt, “We’ve been promised a clam-bake when it’s all over.”

“Yes, I fancy it will be all over with me when that clam-bake arrives,” sighed Edna Black. “Since Tavia has ‘turned turtle’ I don’t even have the fun of sneezing for exercise.”

“It’s an ill wind – and so on,” ventured Dick. “That was a most abominable habit of yours – sneezing when you were too lazy to open your mouth to laugh.”

“But I never would have believed that Tavia would get so – so – ”

“Batty,” finished Amy Brooks. “It’s slang, but I know of no English word into which the explicit ‘batty’ may be translated.”

“And Tavia of all girls,” added Ned, ponderingly.

“But it seems to agree with her,” declared Cologne. “Haven’t you noticed her petal complexion?”

“Too much like the drug store variety,” objected Nita. “I like something more substantial.”

“Sour grapes,” fired back Ned, who could always be depended on to take Tavia’s part. “Yours is so perfect – ”

“Oh, I know – freckles,” admitted the confused Nita with a pout. “Fair skins always freckle.”

“Then why don’t you close the ‘fair’ and raffle off,” suggested Dick. “Much easier than sleeping in lemon juice every night.”

“Molly Richards, you’re too smart!” snapped the abused one.

“Not altogether so,” replied Dick. “At least this abominable French can’t prove it. I have always believed that the only way to acquire a good French accent would be to get acute tonsillitis. Then one might choke out the gutterals beautifully.”

The girls of Glenwood school were supposed to be busy preparing for examinations. They had congregated in little knots, out of doors, scattering under the leafing oaks, and the temptation to gossip was evidently more than mere girls could withstand amid such surroundings.

“There’s Dorothy now,” announced Cologne, as the latter turned into the path.

“Yes, and there’s Tavia,” followed Ned, showing keen pleasure as the late absent one made her appearance on the lawn.

“Now we will have a chance to study her complex – ” lisped Nita with rather a malicious tone.

“Suit you better to study your complex – verbs,” snapped Ned, while Tavia and Dorothy came up at that moment.

Profuse greetings were showered upon Tavia, for the girls were well pleased to have her back with them, and it must be admitted that every eye which turned toward her came back in an unanimous vote “beautiful.” Even Nita did not dare cast a dissenting glance – she could not, for indeed Tavia had improved wonderfully, as we have seen, under the “grooming.”

Her hazel eyes shown brighter than ever in her clear peach-blow skin, her hair was not now “too near red” as Nita had been in the habit of declaring, but a true chestnut brown, and as “glossy as her new tan shoes,” whispered Ned to Cologne.

Tavia wore her brown gingham dress, and much to the surprise of her companions, had “her neck turned in.”

“What happened to your collar?” asked Dick, with a merry twinkle in her eyes.

“I happened to it,” answered Tavia promptly. “No sense in having one’s neck all marked up from collars – going about advertising capital punishment.”

“Behold the new woman! We will make her president of our peace conference. But of course we would not expect her to settle her own ‘squabs’ with Nita. We will have a committee of subs, for that department of the work,” said Cologne as she made room for Dorothy at her side, being anxious to get a private word with her. Tavia found a place between Ned and Dick, and soon the others were at least pretending to be at their books, realizing that too much time had already been wasted on outside matters.

The morning typified one of those rare days in June, and the girls on the lawn were like human spring blossoms – indeed what is more beautiful than a wholesome, happy young girl?

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